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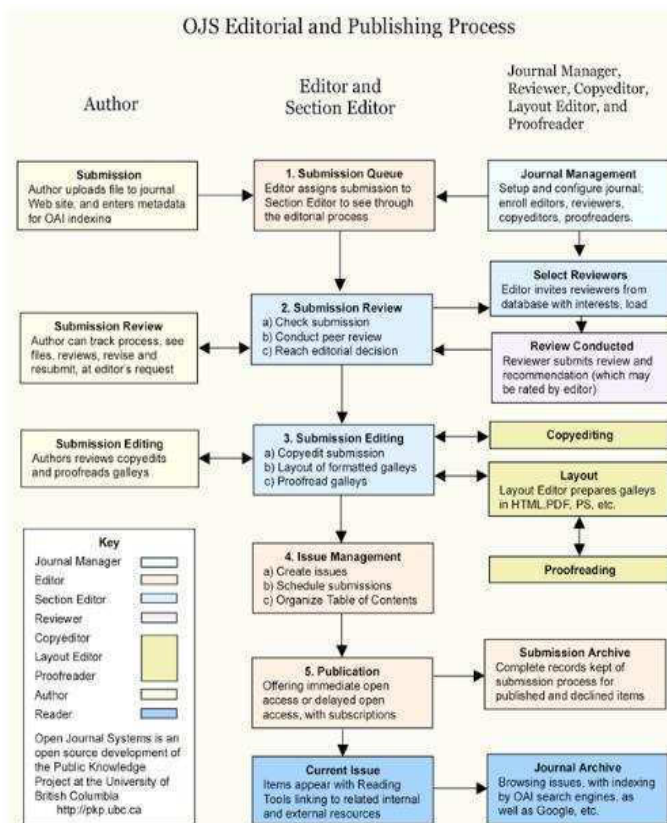
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Should I Take It or Should I Not? **Exploration of Students' Course Choice as a Product**

Goknil N. Kocak

Mersin University, School of Tourism and Hospitality Management
Ciftlikkoy Campus, Mersin, Turkey. Email: goknilkocak@hotmail.com

N. Serdar Sever

Anadolu University, Faculty of Communication Sciences
Public Relations and Advertising Department, Yunus Emre Campus,
26470, Eskisehir, Turkey. Email: nssever@anadolu.edu.tr

ABSTRACT: This study aims to explore the components of students' course selection process and overlooking these components from marketing perspective. Three focus groups were administered. Data revealed that the focus groups participants' responses are congregated in two main categories: (1) WOM related evaluations. (2) Official concerns based evaluations. The WOM related evaluations were emerged as; (1.1) instructors' in-class performance, (1.2) the degree of attractiveness of course-related virtual environment, (1.3) the toughness of course assignments and their grading policies. Official concerns based evaluations were surfaced as; (2.1) level of academic and practical experience of instructors (2.2) the use of computer-enhanced learning technologies. Like consumer purchase decision process it is observed that, students too seek reliable information and gather information mainly from senior students in the form of WOM activities; and courses and instructors' performance factors which are counterparts of product and services in academia are evaluated based on information in WOM activities.

Keywords: Product choice, WOM, students, focus group, exploration, virtual environment.

JEL Classifications: M31, I20

INTRODUCTION

The world around us evolves, so are universities. The new degree programs such as double majors' increase in distance and online learning programs, and certificate programs have forced universities to understand their students' expectations and manage service performance. Ironically, marketing departments in universities are now have to market to their students. Extend of such activities are not limited to universities, faculties or to departments; it has reached to courses and instructors at micro level. The students are becoming centerpiece of universities and it's not up to lecturers or schools to decide who to enroll courses.

Having two hats in life, as students and consumers, naturally, just as they do for goods and services, as being students, they too are undergone a decision-making process in deciding among courses and instructors. In fact, they operate with same drive, respond to similar stimulus, use same physical and psychological screens and certainly ask for a benefit. Because, it is them who will be happy, satisfied or dissatisfied with a 'purchase' decision, and eventually face a similar cost that a misled consumer would pay with a wrong product choice. Consequently; students, just as any consumer, seek appropriate information in order to make satisfactory decisions and prevent loss. Apparently, listening students and understanding their course selection decision process with its influencers becoming more important. What lies behind course selection behavior? This is where the lights should be cast upon.

The purpose of this study is to explore the components of students' course selection process and overlooking these components from marketing perspective. In order, the leading research question

is “how students choose a course”. These types of questions which are open-ended and exploratory, addresses qualitative research methodologies, aiming to generate hypothesis (*propositions*) rather than to test them (Bruck, 2005). Qualitative methods are used to understand what lies behind any phenomenon (*such as course selection*) to gain novel or fresh slants on things about which already known (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

METHOD

In research projects where how people approach events, constructs, previous experiences of others or how people interact are the major aims of this investigation. Focus group is deemed as the most profound research method (Krueger, 1994). Despite some concern on the possible cluttering effect that group dynamics have on the analysis of data (Newton and McKenna, 2007; Reed and Payton, 1997), focus group was chosen as the most appropriate data collection method. While the purpose of this study is exploring course decision behavior, conducting focus group technique is viewed as the most appropriate method. Use of focus group technique enhanced participated students to recall, share and discuss the factors that they consider prior to course selection by providing appropriate discussion platform for interaction.

Despite the various views in the focus group literature on how many focus groups would be sufficient, the common view is total of three or four groups are good enough in order to reveal reliable data (Aaker et al., 2004; Daymon, 2002; Krueger, 1994). Another discussion in the literature is when focus groups start to repeat themselves and come up with same findings that indicates a cut-off point and is an ideal number for focus groups. It is suggested that three focus groups should be planned with the option to conduct additional focus groups if new information was still being collected at the end of the third session (Krueger, 1994). In this research, focus group sessions were continued until the researchers make sure that the data become repetitive and up to this point three focus groups were administered. Each focus group sessions continued approximately one hour.

Clark and Holmes (2007) indicated that focus groups involved a purposive sample as sample methodology which also conducted to this study for sample selection. The researchers attempted to chose the best sample group. All of the participants in the study were chosen among the students at Anadolu University, Faculty of Communication Sciences. The reason why this tertiary institution chosen was that Faculty of Communication Science offers wide variety and quantity of courses to choose among. At the semester this project was carried out. School offered more 65 elective courses. Eventually, this is a clear indicator of wider possible course choice, as in increasing of choice among available consumer goods. Thus, due to its wider elective course availability, Anadolu University, Faculty of Communication Sciences was deemed as an appropriate venue to carry this research.

Focus groups were administered at Faculty of Communication Science’s classrooms. First focus group consisted of 12 students from public relations and advertising department, second focus group consisted of 12 students from communication department, and the third focus group consisted of 10 students from both departments that were equally represented among participants. The number of male students was 20 and number of female students was 14. As for the ages of participants, they were all in traditional student age bracket ranging from 20 to 22.

The moderator’s role was fulfilled by one of the researcher in all of the three focus groups. The role of the moderator is to create a highly synergistic environment in which participants openly share their perceptions without hesitations (Clapper and Massey, 1996). It is assumed that the moderator attempts to develop a deeper understanding of the issue and to see it from the participants’ point of views (Krueger and Casey, 2000). In each focus group, a trained graduate assistant fulfilled the reporter role and recorded the narratives.

A good research question needs to be supported by a clear rationale, as it will by necessity, have to leave out aspects considered important to a systematic thinker (Bruck, 2005, p. 240). A good research question of a qualitative study is a statement that identifies the phenomenon to be studied and tells what the researcher specifically focus on and what wanted to known on the subject (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p.38). The questions should be purposefully open and broad allowing the researcher to discover relevant variables in the data (Corbin and Holt, 2004).

Referring to mentioned directions; leading research questions of each focus group are:

- (1) What are your considerations while making course decisions and why?
- (2) Which type of information is more valuable on your decisions and why?

Notice that these questions do not specify any variables but allow significant variables to be discovered in the research process. These questions has designed to ensure that, the data has not been directed to prove a predetermined conclusion by the authors and there is no researcher bias with the recognition that qualitative method in flux and conclusions are supposed to be constructed from data and not imposed on the data (Corbin and Holt, 2004).

Following the focus groups, written records were thoroughly investigated word by word, and themes were determined independently by the two researchers. Then, researchers were cross-checked the themes. This process was carried out to fulfill the validity requirements of qualitative research.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

According to aggregated findings; the focus groups participants' responses are congregated in two main categories. These categories can be labeled as (1) Word of mouth (WOM) related evaluations, and (2) Official concerns based evaluations. The WOM related evaluations were emerged as follows; (1.1) instructors' in-class performance, (1.2) the degree of attractiveness of course-related virtual environment, (1.3) the toughness of course assignments and their grading policies. Official concerns based evaluations were surfaced as follows; (2.1) level of academic and practical experience of instructors, (2.2) the use of computer-enhanced learning technologies.

Focus group findings and some comparisons and verifications in relation to related literature are discussed below.

(1) WOM related evaluations

Participants anonymously agreed that WOM is most effective on their course choice. In general, WOM is defined as exchange of information about a target object or a person face to face or with the help of a communication medium (Brown et. al, 2005). Focus group sessions exerted that senior students' previous experiences is the most trusted factor in course choice. All of 34 participants have voiced the same argument. In accordance with the WOM literature which indicates a correlation between experience of source and the relief of ambiguity and post-purchase dissonance; participants value senior students' comments. Senior students are seen as valuable sources of information by junior year students. Participants agreed that the most important feature of the referring person is his or her identity. 29 of the participants indicated that senior students are more effective above all other sources of information.

Hard-working students are found to be credible sources of information and they come after senior students. Majority of the respondents agreed that they may consider the information from senior students, only if these students have a good reputation among others and known as steadily successful. Opinions of assigned academic advisors come third in the cycle. Even more interestingly, two of the participants indicated that they do not value what the academic advisors' advices. Another two participants pointed that they do not care about the source; rather they only value the information content. Consistent with these findings; Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) revealed that WOM is seven times more effective than print advertisements, and four times more effective than personal sales pitches in manipulating consumer attitudes and behavior.

Another interesting finding is unveiled when participants asked about which type of WOM is more effective. "Which type of information is more valuable on your course decisions? All but one agreed that negative WOM (nWOM) is more effective with respect to positive WOM messages. It is well established that negative information usually has more impact on judgment than positive information (Anderson, 1965; Chevalier and Mayzlin 2003; Mittal et. al, 1998). The reason of this attempt may be that losses loom larger than gains (Kahneman and Tversky, 1976) and students' first intent is preventing loss. Consequently negative WOM receives greater response. WOM related components are as follows.

(1.1) Instructors' in-class performance

Participants stated that instructors' in-class performance and their credibility are interrelated. Expression of one of the participants is summarizing their mutual approach: "...lecturers may be well-established themselves in industrial circles, and they may be knowledgeable in terms of their intellectual capacity. This makes them trustworthy; there is no question about it. But for me it all comes down to how effective he or she is when lecturing. Is he or she a good instructor or not? This is my primary concern as a student." Scholars found that teachers' effectiveness in the classroom and his

or her performance is positively correlated. Similar findings were demonstrated by Frymier and Thompson (1992) study.

(1.2) The degree of attractiveness of virtual environment,

Participants further stated that fun factor is the most effective medium in their elective course choices. Students further their comments that fun is a result of class related virtual tools and his or her lecturing style. This may sound a bit like “sage on the stage” approach.

One of the participants well elaborated on the subject: “...*Why fun? If a course comes with a web page or RSS mechanism, it is absolutely fun. Imagine you have class in 8:30 am in the morning. You receive a SMS that says lecture is cancelled. It is fun.*”

The participants added that students attempt to collect information on these issues mainly from senior students.

(1.3) The toughness of course assignments and their grading.

Majority of the participants agreed on the fact that they seek and deliver information regarding to course assignment and their toughness, rather than the information about instructors. Nevertheless, the one possible outcome of WOM is to reduce perceived risk. Participants asserted that students spend every effort to reduce the risk of failing a course, of which will eventually involve loss of financial resources and may cause them of being psychologically unstable. The perceived risk types can be categorized as functional or financial risk that is related to product or service, and being financially disrupted and consumer-focused social or psychological risk results from the consumers or prospects’ interaction with their social environment (von Wangenheim and Bayon, 2004). Parallel to the literature, findings pinpoints that students do use traditional WOM in order for reducing the perceived risks, if any, that may be a part of the course chosen. If they perceive that assignments are time consuming and if course requires great many details to tackle, and ladders of grading scale is hard to climb in return, then they don’t bother to enroll to that particular course. This because there are many functional and psychological risks involved, for that matter.

(2) Official concerns based evaluations

Participants pointed that the secondary criteria for course choice comes from information of official sources. This dimension was observed as a limited influence on course choice in compare to WOM. It seems that WOM has greater meaning above all sources of information. Students exerted that they are more prone to internet for their daily life but when it comes to course choice, participants pointed that they don’t go any further than checking the lecturers’ reputation and reading course definitions from the official school web browser. The researchers by no means can be sure about what might be the reason behind this phenomenon. Nevertheless, it is possible to conclude that only few participants have their own laptop, and majority have a desk top at home or at dormitories. Due to the time limitation in computer accessibility, students might want to spend their spare time for private use or surfing on the web when they logged on to the internet.

The details that were observed related to official concern based evaluations are listed and discussed below.

(2.1) Level of academic and practical experience of instructors

The findings of this study indicate that instructors’ previous academic and practical experiences are not as important as their in-class performances. This findings overlaps with the findings about why students do not search course related information. The outcome explains that why students do not respect any lecturer related course information, his or her academic standing and/or practical experiences that may be found in official records or sources. They rather tent to rely on information they gather from senior students. Solely, the surfaced situation reinstates the fact that students find WOM related information more reputable as compare to information from official sources.

(2.2) The use of computer-enhanced learning technologies

As for the computer backed learning technologies, participants agreed anonymously that it’s an asset and must be applicable in every single course. A common point is web based learning technologies must be used in courses. In fact, they said they prefer a course with Web CT page over a course which has no such supplemental support facility. Participants stressed that they would appreciate any course that comes with wikis and they were even more appreciative to the idea of courses having RSS feeding facility.

CONCLUSION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

As conclusion; perhaps the most peculiar finding of the study is WOM messages received from senior students are the common source of information, and their experiences often seen as a point of reference in choosing a course. As pointed out by some scholars, students must make choices with very little formal information as to what a course is about and how it will be conducted. This leads them to rely on word of mouth from trusted students who might be familiar with the course or instructor (Davis et al., 1979). Prior experience with the instructor or subject matter plays an important role in course-related word of mouth activities (Cadotte et al., 1987; Curran and Rosen, 2006).

Naturally, it was not only them but many scholars since have consistently demonstrated the links between WOM and consumer purchasing behavior (Arndt, 1968; Brown and Reingen, 1987; Engel et al., 1969; Howard and Gengler, 2001; Richins, 1983), product success (Day, 1971; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955), satisfaction with WOM experiences (Burzynski and Bayer, 1977; Harrison-Walker, 2001), diffusion of innovations (Singhal et al., 1999; Sultan et al., 1990; Sun et al., 2006), perception of risk (Shrum and Bischak, 2001), and persuasion (Bytwerk, 2005; Carl, 2006; Compton and Pfau, 2004; Spangenberg and Giese, 1997). Like consumer purchase decision process it is observed that, students too seek reliable information and gather information from senior students in the form of WOM activities; and courses and instructors' performance factors which are counterparts of product and services in academia are evaluated based on WOM activities; again the degree of attractiveness of virtual environment is also benchmarked against to WOM based information; and finally in order for managing the perceived risk, the toughness of course assignments and grading were repeatedly checked with senior students. In fact, WOM has a strong influence on product and service perceptions (Fitzgerald, 1995). Clearly as implied in here, similar findings are valid for course choice as well.

The majority of research addressing WOM has focused on its generation. The few if any attention was given to the how WOM messages are considered by the receivers represented a significant gap in research addressing WOM activity (Bansal and Voyer, 2000). The novice of this research is that despite traditional approach of examining WOM generation process, the dynamic nature of how the messages are sought and evaluated by the receivers constitutes the epicenter of this study. Not all dimensions of WOM were surfaced in the study. Weakness of theoretical sampling that had utilized in the study may be one of the reasons of limited appearance of WOM dimensions. This may be considered as limitation of the study. Nevertheless, it must be indicated that data had repeated itself in three of the focus group sessions. However, limited appearance of WOM dimensions may not be the limitation but a significant finding out of this study. In order for data collection if a questionnaire were administered, undoubtedly students were responding to the pre-structured questionnaire items which surely consist of all the WOM dimensions. In that case, respondents would somehow pushed to construct a respond within the scope of pre-structured frame of researcher. However, in this case, researchers did not aim to testify a pre-structured frame, but rather to make expedition to find out why students choose a course.

LIMITATION AND FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

The effects of WOM in the educational context have gone largely unexplored. This study aims to explain how bachelor of communications students who are enrolled to various courses at tertiary level value word-of-mouth messages in making a course decision. As for every research, this study is not exempt from some limitations. The most peculiar limitation of this particular study emerges due to the nature of focus group studies. Due to the nature of focus group studies, findings of this study may not represent the common wisdom of tertiary students. In other words, the focus group discussions have an inherent limitation that is lack of generalization, although the focus group participants represented the most accurate picture of their attitudes about course selection. This qualitative study consists of the students who were enrolled to bachelor of communications. Administering similar studies on participants with different attributes may reveal further interesting findings. The findings of this study may help developing quantitative research projects on the same subject in future.

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